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Rationality as Rhetorical Strategy at the Barcelona Disputation, 1263: A Cautionary Tale

Often, composition teachers present public debate as if it occurs on a rhetorically level playing field, with victory going to the person who argues most logically. Real-world contestants are seldom so equal in power. We can enrich our pedagogy by studying such encounters; example: the 1263 disputation at Barcelona between Rabbi Nachmanides and Friar Paul Christian.

Prologue

It is a commonplace of contemporary composition studies that we want to empower our students to speak up and speak out as activist citizens. Often, we approach this goal pedagogically by inviting students to participate in debates over issues of contemporary interest, as a quick perusal of popular composition course readers will attest. Too often, however, we present these debates as simple “for” or “against” situations, in which the interlocutors are presumed to combat on a rhetorically level playing field, and the “winner” is he or she who can argue most logically and fairly, present himself or herself most trustworthily, and invoke the audience’s emotions most poignantly. We do this even though we know such a rhetorically ideal world seldom exists in the argumen-
tative lists our students will enter after graduation; and indeed, our own class-
rooms often give the lie to our professed principles, as we openly favor the left-
liberal “side” in the debates we present. How many of us who have assigned
Martin Luther King, Jr’s, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” for example, have also
assigned texts written by those who opposed him, and I don’t mean only white
supremacist racists but also other black leaders who questioned his tactics?

Moreover, we often accompany such instruction with exhortations along
the lines of “Even one individual can make a difference in the world.” We em-
phasize the efficacy of isolated protest even though we know that results for
real-world arguers are often decidedly more mixed, not to mention, more effic-
cacious the more people one can get involved in one’s cause. We thus may un-
intentionally set up circumstances in which students can become easily
discouraged if they act on our advice and don’t get revolutionary results right
away.

In other words, it’s difficult to teach argument in ways that represent the
complexities in which real-world rhetorical contentions are conducted. Bruce
Herzberg and I attempted to address these difficulties in our composition
reader, Negotiating Difference. We tried to include materials from more than
two “sides” in the issues dealt with in each unit of this text. Even the one on the
antebellum debate over slavery reveals a complex range of opinions and argu-
mentative strategies. To be sure, each issue dealt with in a unit of this text has
been resolved—there have been “winners”—slavery has been abolished, for
example. But we tried not to present these resolutions as emerging from the
kind of idealized debate situation that I describe above. Further, the texts we
assembled do not convey the impression that one or two leaders made a cru-
cial difference in turning the tide. Even local failures can be seen as contribut-
ing to eventual victories for social justice.

A case in point is Charles Langston. Arrested in 1859 for violating the
Fugitive Slave Law, he defended himself passionately in a speech to the court
(Bizzell and Herzberg 232 ff). In this speech, he freely admits that he violated
the law and vows to do so again if given the chance. But he attempts to con-
vince the white judge and jury of the rightness of his actions, invoking the
values of the Revolutionary War, which he hopes they share with him. At the
same time, he addresses the black people who are in the courtroom audience
and who will also, he can assume, read newspaper accounts of what he said,
exhorting them to action in stinging terms of reproach. Langston’s speech, I
would argue, is a powerful piece of rhetoric. Was it successful? You decide. He
was convicted anyway, fined, and sent to jail, although his penalties were less
severe than those levied against others arrested with him. When he was released, he resumed his abolitionist activities; it is hard to say how many he inspired to do the same.

Langston’s speech, with its use of Revolutionary War imagery, also illustrates another advantage of treating debates over controversial issues as rhetorically complex: such approaches make it easier to identify and teach examples of so-called hybrid, alternative, or culturally mixed discourses. Contemporary composition studies has become increasingly interested in such discourses because they perform unique kinds of intellectual work and empower students from widely varying discourse communities to craft effective public voices. (This is a line of research that has particularly interested me. See, for example, the recent collection I coedited with Christopher Schroeder and Helen Fox, ALT-DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy; my essay in this volume discusses the intellectual work performed by alternative discourses. I’ve also analyzed mixed discourses employed by earlier American persuaders in an essay that catalogs William Apess’s and Frederick Douglass’s claims to what had been considered exclusively European American cultural allusions [Bizzell 1997].)

I offer this essay as an extension of this research project into another historical field, medieval Spain. Here was a time and place holding great interest for anyone who is interested in so-called hybrid, alternative, or culturally mixed discourses. Rule of the peninsula was divided between Christians and Muslims throughout the period, and within their kingdoms lived some of the most prosperous and culturally productive Jewish communities ever known. This was a time and place of great cultural cross-fertilization, when people learned each other’s languages, imitated each other’s literary forms, and imbibed each other’s world views; when people collaborated on complex cultural projects, for example, in international diplomacy and the translation of classical texts.

Medieval Spain provides many opportunities for studying mixed discourses, but I intend to focus on only one here: the public, oral religious dispute conducted between Christians and Jews at Barcelona in 1263. This is a rhetorical situation in which we might expect that the interlocutors would attempt to use mixed discourses, borrowing from one another’s discourse communities to effect persuasion. Apparently, this is indeed what happened, as I
will attempt to show. Indeed, as is often the case when we analyze mixed discourses, we discover that the discourses being mixed were not so separate to begin with. Considerable cultural cross-fertilization and sharing must have already occurred for such communication across (highly permeable) cultural boundaries to be possible. Scott Lyons has called this phenomenon “contact heteroglossia” (89, italics in original).

At the same time, this is a rhetorical situation that is far from a level playing field: the Jewish participants were forced to participate in a contest decidedly stacked against them, in which “winning” would be as dangerous as “losing.” I am particularly interested in how the principal Jewish interlocutor in this perilous situation used a sort of appeal to logos, or rationality, not because he thought that rational arguments would necessarily convince all rational hearers, but because he hoped, at least, that his ability to employ them would convince his Christian audience that he was human—while at the same time, encouraging his Jewish audience in the reasonableness of remaining true to their faith. In effect, he demonstrated his ability to be rational as an enhancement of his ethos (for the ironies of applying this classical Greek rhetorical term to a Jew, see Holdstein). Was he successful? The results, according to the historical record, were decidedly mixed.

I must provide some information from that historical record to contextualize my analysis of the actual rhetorical strategies of the disputation. Readers already familiar with medieval Jewish-Christian relations, particularly in Spain, may wish to skip the next two sections of this essay.

**Jewish-Christian Debates: Historical and Cultural Background**

Near Eastern Studies scholar Mark Cohen points out that from the very early days of Christianity, the new faith defined its identity against Judaism. Neither religion engaged Islam with anything close to the same intensity. Cohen describes Jewish-Muslim religious disputation as “bland” (154), in large part because although Muslims revered the Bible, they did not see it as a major document for their faith, regarded its text as corrupt, and thus could easily explain away interpretations that clashed with their own views. In contrast, Christian anti-Jewish argument specifically attacked Jewish interpretations of Biblical texts that Christians wanted to read as prefiguring the advent of Christ. Jews reciprocated with passages denigrating Christianity in the Mishnah (rab-
binic commentaries on the Torah, or Jewish Bible, comprising mostly what Christians call the Old Testament) and Talmud (a compilation of further rabbinic commentary on the Torah and Jewish law). Cohen also mentions an early medieval biography of Jesus, *Toledot Yeshu*, that was quite nasty, impugning the sexual morality of both Jesus and his mother (140–141). Cohen believes that the early medieval Biblical commentator Rashi—perhaps the most famous exegete in the entire Jewish tradition—shaped his work specifically to refute Christian Biblical exegesis (141–142). But, Cohen says, “the Christian-Jewish debate heated up in the twelfth and especially the thirteenth centuries, in tandem with the worsening of Jewish-Christian relations on all other levels” (144).

Why? By the twelfth century, over a hundred years of crusades to the Holy Land plus continued contact with Muslim culture in Spain brought new knowledge of and interest in classical thought to European Christendom. Under its influence, thinkers elevated reason as the supreme human attribute. Reason was believed to have taught humans a basic moral law, called natural law, even before divine revelation. The big question was whether reason also endorsed the beliefs of Christianity. It was initially obvious that reason called some of these beliefs into question—e.g., it seemed irrational to believe that a virgin could conceive, that God would allow Himself to be crucified, etc. Some people thought that careful use of reason would confirm these beliefs while others thought final commitment to them could be obtained only through faith.

Because elevated respect for rationality raised these questions for believers, as historian Anna Sapir Abulafia has explained, the Christian community became hyper-sensitive to anyone else who raised these questions, hence creating a new interest in ferreting out heretics and also a new concern for the kinds of reasons Jews had typically given for rejecting Christianity. It was troubling that Jews had long raised the same questions about Christianity’s rationality that were now being raised by Christian thinkers’ rational examination of Christian beliefs. If reason could be made to support Christianity, it was also troubling that Jews continued to reject Christianity. There was a new desire for uniformity in the faith community. Jews were the obvious misfits, the most visible and persistent in northern Europe, and the most troubling everywhere because, unlike Muslims, the Bible was the central holy text for them but they did not find the same meanings in it that Christians did. There was a new urgency either to persuade Jews to convert or to drive them out.

Abulafia suggests that this urgency was also fueled by the increasing prominence of Jews in international finance as Europe shifted over during this time to a money economy, making changes that disturbed many. Jews had no
choice but to engage in money-lending because almost every other profession was closed to them and they could not own land. But this profession made them hated, made them seem greedy and evil, and made people think it was Jews’ evil natures that made them continue to reject Christianity. Or maybe if Jews did not respond to rational arguments, they were not human at all. Philosopher Barbara Hurwitz cites this syllogism from medieval Christian thinker Peter the Venerable: “since man is a rational animal, and the Jews would not listen to reason, the Jews are not men but beasts” (88).

Abulafia discusses a number of twelfth-century Christian texts that highlight new concern for Jewish resistance. For example, in Gilbert Crispin’s dialogue between a Christian master and pupil about the mystery of the Eucharist, the master attempts to use reason to explain it but eventually must stress “that what enabled one to be sure that the bread and the wine on the altar became the blood and body of Christ was the authority of the institutional church rather than reason” (80). Abulafia observes further:

It is worth noting that although this dialogue was composed as an interplay of questions and answers, the rubricator of the sole surviving twelfth-century manuscript added Iudeus and Christianus to some of Gilbert’s Interrogatio and Responsio headings or replaced them with the new nomenclature. This is another clear indication of how closely the Jewish-Christian debate was associated with internal Christian discussions of faith. (80)

Christian thinkers sought many kinds of rational arguments to convince Jews (and perhaps also doubters within their own faith) that Christianity and rationality were compatible. For example, some cited natural phenomena that appeared to make the Christian miracles plausible, explaining that Mary remained virginal just as a glass is not broken when the sun shines through it (see Abulafia 82). Some debated whether signs should be used to convince Jews—signs being miracles believed to have occurred in the present day. One example occurs in the autobiography of a Jew who converted. He explains that the local bishop vetoed his Christian friend’s offer to grasp a hot iron if the Jew would promise to convert if the Christian were not burned. That a miracle would occur supposedly would provide rational evidence that Christianity is the true religion; but the local bishop insisted that this truth would have to be taken on faith alone (see Abulafia 89). Christian thinkers also accused Jews of irrationally ignoring the context of Biblical texts that permitted them to be read as prefigurations of the advent of Jesus.

Furthermore, Christians attempted to find ways in which Judaism and
rationality were incompatible. They lambasted Jewish ritual law as full of contradictions (thus offensive to reason) and focused on carnal concerns (thus offensive to spirituality). Some Christian thinkers attempted to point out contradictions in Jewish religious texts. Perhaps the first to do so to any great extent was a Spanish Jew who took the baptismal name Petrus Alfonsi when he converted. In the *Dialogi* that he wrote c. 1100 C.E. between his former self and his newly converted Christian self, he condemns Jewish religious texts by “[selecting] a certain type of rabbinic exegesis from the Talmud and [scrutinizing] it in order to determine to what extent it concurred with what reason teaches us about God and the relationship between Creator and creation” (Abulafia 91). The Jewish interlocutor in this dialogue, according to Barbara Hurwitz, also provides the first, albeit intentionally ineffectual, defense of the Talmud against Christian attacks. Hurwitz extensively documents the multicultural nature of this dialogue, noting that Alfonsi attempts to defend Christianity against Judaism by using material from the Kabbalah (Jewish mystical teachings) as well as from the Talmud (60 ff.); by using concepts from Muslim theology, such as arguments about the anthropomorphism of God (98 ff.) and about the reasons (or lack thereof) for kashruth (Jewish laws pertaining to food) (129 ff.); and by using examples and forms of reasoning from the Greco-Arabic science and philosophy that the former Jew Alfonsi was one of the first to introduce to the Latin West (88 ff.).

Jewish resistance to these arguments, which were rational in the eyes of those who made them, sprang, the Christians believed, from stubborn Jewish adherence to the irrational Talmud. Jews had been tolerated within Christendom because it was known that they revered the Bible, although interpreting it incorrectly; because their people witnessed the events in the life of Jesus; and because their current degraded state showed what happened to those who witnessed but did not believe in Jesus as the Christ. This rationale of toleration had been worked out very early on by Augustine. But as Christians became more aware of the importance of the Talmud to Jews, this rationale weakened and with it, a justification for Jewish presence. As Abulafia explains:

> Because of the Christianization of reason in this period, this meant that [Jews] were not only thought to be excluded from salvation in a religious sense; they were seen to be falling outside the parameters of humanity as well. . . Just as Jews were perceived as standing outside the realm of human reason, they were seen in this context [of the institutional church's drive for universality] as deliberately distancing themselves from the rest of mankind. The distinctive features of Juda-
ism were thus interpreted as constituting an affront to everything the vibrant, reforming Church of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries seemed to stand for . . . . It is this [Jewish lack of fit in the Christian worldview], I would argue, that gradually began to hollow out the traditional Augustinian formula of testimonium veritatis. (124, 129, 134)

Within this intellectual climate, obviously, Jewish-Christian debate is not going to occur on a level playing field. Jews are going to be at a severe disadvantage. At the same time, it will be seen that Jewish and Christian cultures are deeply intertwined, hardly to be thought of as separate cultures at all. And it will be seen how the ability to appear rational becomes the hallmark of humanity. I now turn to the specific circumstances of the debate at Barcelona.

**Historical and Cultural Contexts of the Disputation at Barcelona**

Before the disputation at Barcelona happened, Jews had lived in Spain for a very long time—according to Jewish legend, since the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in the fifth century B.C.E.—and they were well established there during the Roman Empire. After the fifth century C.E., Jews in the region began to suffer from both Roman and Visigothic Christian persecution and forced conversions—often at the point of the sword—but the situation improved for them after the Muslim conquest in 711 C.E., and the tenth and eleventh centuries would be regarded as a golden age of Spanish Jewish culture, eloquently described by medievalist María Rosa Menocal. According to historian Jane Gerber, the Muslim kingdoms of Spain were the most tolerant of Jews of any within Islam (21). Things began to go bad again for Jews with the Christian reconquest of Spain and the cultural developments of the twelfth century that I have just been discussing. Once again, social pressure, financial penalties, and even physical punishment were used to push Jews toward conversion, but I find it fascinating that the Christian monarchs of the Reconquista and the clergy they supported did not want to use death threats to force Jews to convert, and indeed, often actively protected Jewish communities from mob violence. Rather, Christians became increasingly eager to persuade them, hence necessitating the development of effective culturally mixed rhetorics.

By the mid-thirteenth century, a number of Jews had already converted—the influential early polemicist Petrus Alfonsi has already been mentioned—and some of them became active in efforts to persuade their former co-religionists. One of these was the Jew Saul, who took his children into Christianity, while his wife remained a Jew, and ultimately became a Dominican.
monk, taking the name Friar Pablo Christiani, or Paul Christian. This man had received a traditional Jewish education, and he was among the first to develop a new missionizing rhetoric that attempted to convert Jews by showing them that their own religious texts, notably the Talmud, bore witness to the truths of Christianity. The Christian rulers of Spanish kingdoms were already requiring Jews to listen to missionary sermons in their own synagogues. But as Robert Chazan, the preeminent historian of the disputation, explains, these forced sermons were not very useful for the development of new rhetorical techniques because “the sermonizer had no way of assessing the impact of his words on his auditors” (55), that is, unless they immediately rushed to the baptismal font. The missionaries wanted to know what kinds of objections Jews would raise to the new persuasive arguments based on Talmudic evidence; they also felt confident that whatever these objections were, they were prepared to refute them, and if they were seen to do so, this would push the Jews more firmly toward conversion.

The Dominicans gained the compliance of their ardent supporter, King James I of Aragon, a hero of the Reconquista, to compel local Jewish sages to publicly debate them. This disputation was convened at the royal palace in Barcelona on Friday, July 20, 1263, and it would last for four days (with an interval of rest on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, and Sunday, the Christian Sabbath). King James himself presided, and a great crowd of several hundred people attended, including “royal officials, barons, ecclesiastical dignitaries, leading burghers, and Catalan Jews” (Chazan 1). Friar Paul Christian was to be the chief disputant for the Christians, supported by other Christian clerics; and among the group of rabbis assembled, the natural leadership position fell to Rabbi Moses ben Nahman of Gerona, a man then in his sixties, an important community leader who was recognized not only throughout the Iberian Peninsula but internationally as one of the greatest Jewish scholars of his, or any, age; he has become known in the Jewish tradition as the Ramban, or Nahmanides.

We must understand, as Chazan says, that the “Barcelona disputation” was not an open intellectual engagement between two equal opponents operating under the same rules; it was in no sense a debate on the relative merits of Christianity and Judaism” (50). The Church would never have permitted such a debate, and few Jews would have dared to participate in one in any case. Rather, the Dominicans who caused the disputation to happen also determined what questions would be addressed, and these pertained only to whether or not Jewish religious texts brought forward by Friar Paul identified Jesus as the
Messiah. Friar Paul’s strategy was to prove from Jewish sources that the Messiah had already come, that he was both human and divine, and that he suffered and died to save humankind from sin; none of these points is connected specifically with Jesus in the rabbinic literature, but Paul believed that if he could prove all three, Nahmanides would have to admit that only Jesus fulfilled them all.

Furthermore, the format of the disputation was structured so that Friar Paul always spoke first and posed questions to Nahmanides, whose responses were restricted to answering these questions only. (That was the plan, at least; Nahmanides's account of the disputation shows him cleverly outwitting these restrictions at several points.) It will be seen that these elements of the disputation preserved the Christian side almost entirely from serious risk—no truths of their religion were to be debated, and if Friar Paul were defeated, he would have failed only to prove that Jewish texts meant what he said they did. On the other hand, Nahmanides risked much. If he defended the Jewish position ably and disproved Friar Paul’s interpretations, he risked offending the high secular and religious authorities in attendance and bringing down more persecution on his fellow Jews. But if he did not defend the Jewish side ably, he risked seriously demoralizing a population who was already under severe psychological and physical assault from the surrounding majority culture.

It will be seen that this is the kind of unequal real-world debate situation that I discussed in my introduction. The disputation was not to be a free-for-all; King James himself served as moderator, as I noted—a powerful authority who could, and did, insist that the participants take turns speaking and that each had time to say what he wanted—or dared—to say. But given the way the disputation was convened and structured by the Christians, it will be seen that the Jews were at a perilous disadvantage.

We do not know exactly what happened when the disputation took place (an engaging dramatization can be found in the film, The Disputation: A Theological Debate Between Christians and Jews, directed by Geoffrey Sax). Robert Chazan has carefully marshaled and evaluated much of the evidence, which includes a brief account of the dispute written in Latin for King James’s archives and a much longer account written in Hebrew by Nahmanides for a
wide Jewish audience. On the basis of Chazan’s cautious analysis, I would like to discuss a few examples of what probably occurred at Barcelona. I will be quoting from Nahmanides’s account of the proceedings, bearing in mind that, as Chazan says, it is not a “stenographic report” (102) but a “literary masterpiece” (103), the techniques of which Chazan analyses in exquisite detail. As a text, it bears a family resemblance to Charles Langston’s speech to the court, since it addresses multiple audiences, with little hope of persuading the audience holding the immediate balance of power in the situation (in Nahmanides’s case, the Christians) and great concern for affecting the relatively disempowered audience avidly listening from the back rows (in Nahmanides’s case, the Jews).

**The Rhetorical Strategies of the Disputation**

As I noted earlier, we might expect in such a disputation to find both interlocutors attempting to employ each other’s cultural capital to effect persuasion, thereby creating varieties of mixed discourse. Let me first point out moments when they do so. Example: At one point, Friar Paul brings forward a midrash (rabbinical commentary) based on Isaiah 52:13; the midrash “explained the three verbs in the verse as indicating that the Messiah will ‘rise beyond Abraham, be exalted above Moses, and be lifted beyond the heavenly angels’” (Chazan 167). Friar Paul argues that this interpretation shows that the rabbis believed the Messiah would be divine, for how else could he be superior even to the angels? Nahmanides counters by saying that Paul is not reading the verse in context, for if he did so, he would realize that the rabbis often compared great human beings favorably with angels. “He who does not know what is above and below in books, perverts the word of the living G–d!” exclaims Nahmanides in his narrative (692). Nahmanides offers his own interpretation of the verbs in the verse: they indicate that the Messiah, while fully human, would excel even the angels in his accomplishments and his knowledge of God. Notice here that Friar Paul has attempted to base his persuasion in a sort of mixed discourse, making use of Jewish textual interpretation and turning it to Christological account; and Nahmanides uses against him the stipulation that texts should be interpreted in context, which had often been used by Christians to try to persuade Jews to read the Bible Christologically.

Another example of what we might call “dueling mixed discourses” occurs, according to the account of Nahmanides, when the disputants are discussing the concept of the Incarnation. Friar Paul has just been attempting to prove that we know the Messiah has come because the punishment of sin in
hell has been abrogated, a dispensation that, the friar contends, was promised in Jewish texts about the sin of Adam. The rabbi dismisses this argument because no witnesses can be brought (from hell) to corroborate it. Nahmanides then takes the opportunity to address King James directly on the idea that the Messiah could come as a human being who was also divine.

All of your life, you, our lord king, a Christian son of a Christian father and mother, have heard priests, monks, and preachers speaking of the Nazarene’s birth. They have filled your mind and the marrow of your bones with this thing, and it comes to you [now] out of habit. Yet, what you believe—and it is the root of your faith—is not acceptable to the [rational] mind. Nature does not work that way, and the prophets never said so . . . the mind of any Jew or any man will not permit him to believe that the Creator of heaven and earth [and all that is therein] would pass through the womb of a Jewish woman, to develop there for seven months, [at which point] an infant was born, [who supposedly is G-d], and who afterwards grew up and later was turned over into the hands of his enemies, who judged him, condemned him to death, and killed him. You then claim, finally, that he became alive and returned to his former state [of divinity]! (673; material in brackets added by translator)

Nahmanides shows himself familiar here with details of the Christian story. Furthermore, he is sympathetic to the effects of Christian education on the most important person in his audience, skillfully suggesting that if there is anything amiss in what the king believes, that’s the fault of those who educated him. (Interestingly, Nahmanides’s explanation of how the king became habituated to the irrational concept of a god born as a human resembles comments in a letter by the Christian thinker Abelard to his son in which he observes that “everyone valued the tradition they were born into and that no one who wanted to live at peace with himself dared to consult reason in matters of faith” [Abulafia, 89].) Nevertheless, Nahmanides asserts that “Nature does not work that way,” and that this Christian story is irrational.

Indeed, in many instances, Nahmanides uses what I am calling an appeal to logos or some presumably universal sense of rationality, in response to the friar’s attempts at mixed discourse. Sometimes Nahmanides points out contradictions in the way Friar Paul actually reads the texts in question. For example, according to Nahmanides’s narrative, at one point the friar said:

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It is explained in the Talmud that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked Elijah [the prophet], “When will the Messiah come?” He answered him, “Ask Messiah himself.” He said, “Where is he?” [Elijah] replied, “At the gate of Rome, among the sick.” So [Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi] went there, and he found him. He asked him, etc. Thus, he had already come, and he is the Nazarene, who rules in Rome. (Nahmanides, 667; material in brackets added by translator)

Nahmanides retorts as follows:

Is it not clearly written here that he has not come? Did [the Rabbi] not ask Elijah, “When will he come?” Similarly, [the Rabbi] asked the Messiah, “When will the master come?” Thus, he had not yet come although according to the literal meaning of these homilies, he was already born, but I do not believe in that. (667; italics in original; material in brackets added by translator)

This exchange is part of a strand of argument in which Nahmanides distinguishes between the birth of the Messiah and his “coming,” that is, assuming his full powers and functions—not because Nahmanides believes that he has indeed been born, but because this distinction is made in the rabbinic texts that Friar Paul adduces. But the particular bit of argument I’ve quoted above relies for its force primarily on the grammatical logic the rabbi points out.

Another sort of rational argument made by the rabbi catches his interlocutors in obvious contradictions. For example, at one point Friar Paul proposes to bring evidence for his side from the work of Moses Maimonides, whom he describes as “their great sage, who has been unparalleled in his greatness for the past four hundred years” (683). Unfortunately, the friar is then unable to find the text he wants in Maimonides’s book, and the rabbi takes the book from his hands and reads another text that supports the rabbi’s position. At this, another cleric present exclaims, “He [Maimonides] utters lies!” (684). Nahmanides “retorted, ‘Until now, he was the greatest sage, and now he is a liar!”’ (684). According to the account of Nahmanides, this retort worked so well that it prompted the king to rebuke the cleric for showing disrespect to scholars—most obviously to Maimonides but perhaps also to Nahmanides.

Nahmanides also catches his interlocutors in contradictions the three times during the disputation (but see especially, 669–670) that Friar Paul brings forward a particular sort of text from midrashic aggadot (rabbinic stories that embellish elements in traditional texts). These state that the Messiah was born on the day of the destruction of the second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 C.E. Friar Paul argues that this text constitutes rabbinic acknowledgment that the Messiah has already come. Nahmanides deals with this ar-
argument in two ways. First, he says, it actually helps his case, not Friar Paul’s, because Jesus was born and died well before the destruction of the Temple. Moreover, argues Nahmanides, this story comes from that portion of the Mishnah called *aggadot*, which might be translated as “stories” or “sermons.” This is a portion of Mishnah that Jews are not obligated to believe, since many *aggadic* stories contradict one another. There is, for example, another *Aggadah* that states that the Messiah will be born close to the end of time. In this exchange, Friar Paul once again essays a mixed discourse, hoping to impress with his knowledge of the relatively obscure *aggadot*; but Nahmanides’s counter is somewhat different. He does not make reference to an argumentative strategy already in play in Jewish-Christian debate but, rather, one might say, appeals to universal rationality. For surely it is irrational to adduce a text that states that your Messiah would be born much later than he actually was. And surely it is rational to use your mental powers to determine how to adjudicate among contradictory texts. As Robert Chazan observes, this is perhaps one of Nahmanides’s most daring appeals to reason, because the Christian equivalent of *aggadot*, sermons expounding theology, usually do carry the requirement that they be believed (154).

Yet, I think that perhaps the most daring rational strategy of the rabbi’s is to comment on the logical progression of issues to be addressed; remember, the agenda was officially under the control of the Dominicans. His first attempt to do so came on the very first day of the disputation, according to his account, when he protests, essentially, the absurdity of Friar Paul’s whole enterprise, because, if the rabbis of the Talmud had really believed and written that the Messiah had come in the person of Jesus, they would not have remained within the religion of Judaism, as it is well known that they did. (See Ramban 658–659.) Here’s another example, from the last day of the disputation:

Originally, we made a condition that at the beginning, we would speak of whether the Messiah had already come and that afterwards, we could discuss whether he is G-d Himself. Since you have not established that he came—for I have refuted all of the foolish proofs that you have brought—I am now vindicated in this encounter, for [the burden of] bringing proof is upon you. You accepted this condition upon yourself. If you will not admit that I have been vindicated, I will take it upon myself to bring real proofs [to convince you], if you will hear me. After it will have been explained that your Nazarene was not the Messiah, there will be no point in your discussing if the Messiah who is destined to come to us will be truly mortal or, [if not], what he will be. (*Disputation* 686; additions in brackets by the translator)
Robert Chazan thinks, and I agree, that Nahmanides probably did not express himself quite this acerbically when he was actually disputing with Friar Paul. Nevertheless, there are enough examples of similar kinds of interjections in his account to make one believe that this was a strategy he employed there, albeit expressed a bit more diplomatically.

Throughout Nahmanides’s account of the Barcelona disputation, he depicts himself as making eminently rational arguments. Reading such moments, I recall the importance of rationality in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian thought, its identification as the hallmark of being human. I speculate that Nahmanides’s rationality constituted his most effective, and yet most subtle, persuasive technique, signaling his human status—and by implication, that of his fellow Jews—even as he used his human mental powers to resist Christian argumentation. There’s almost something wistful about this strategy of the forceful rabbi: He seems to be saying to the Christian audience, “Please, see that because we are rational, we are human; allow us to follow our preferred spiritual path without my having to assert our humanity in so many words.”

Let me stress this point: Nahmanides surely does not think that he will persuade his Christian interlocutors to abandon their religion, no matter how many contradictions he points out in it. His goal is more modest: simply to convince them that the Jews, though resisting Christianity, are fully human with good reasons for believing as they do. What he aims at here exemplifies the kind of more modest goal an individual can achieve in real-world unequal debate situations.

Just one more note on Nahmanides and rational argument: Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, in addition to being a learned and subtle Talmudist and master of rational argumentation, was also an important leader in the development of that complex body of Jewish mystical thought known as Kabbalah, which was defined explicitly in opposition to the rational approach to faith taken in the work of Moses Maimonides and also, as we have seen, in other of Nahmanides’s own work. One might imagine that Nahmanides’s relish for Kabbalah bespoke his awareness that rationality was not sufficient to compass all of human experience. Rather, his employment of rational argument in the Barcelona disputation can be called a rhetorical strategy, with specific pur-
poses in the cultural context of reconquista Spain and a resurgent Church, as I have explained above.

And one more note on culturally mixed discourse in medieval Spain: the greatest medieval Spanish work of Kabbalah is the Zohar, written by Moses of León (1250–1305). Part of this work’s appeal was the glamour cast over it by his claim that he had not written it but, rather, found it after it had been magically transported to Spain from the Holy Land. Historian Bernard Reilly observes that Moses’s account of this mysterious process parallels exactly the earlier story told about how the remains of Saint James were magically transported from the Holy Land to the popular Christian pilgrimage site in northern Spain at Santiago de Compostela (202). Perhaps the acceptance of both myths helps us see why rationality as a rhetorical strategy had only limited success at the disputation at Barcelona in 1263.

A Cautionary Tale?

What success did Nahmanides have? It would appear that he did indeed strengthen Jews’ faith in their own religion. The historical record shows that the disputation was not followed by mass conversion of Jews. Moreover, Nahmanides was given a sizeable cash gift by King James immediately following the event, a gift confirmed not only in the rabbi’s account but also in the king’s own records. Nahmanides says that the king congratulated him for his performance in the disputation thusly: “I have never seen a man who is not right argue his case so well” (Ramban 694). Perhaps the rabbi’s impact on King James is also reflected in the fact that soon there was some easing of various restrictions placed on the Jews in his realm. At the same time, the Dominicans did not abandon the new missionizing rhetoric developed by Friar Paul but, rather, continued to refine and employ it. And when the rabbi’s account of the disputation was published, about eighteen months later, he came under severe ecclesiastical censure and—possibly as a result—left his family behind and at his advanced age, emigrated to the Holy Land of Israel. Furthermore, about one hundred years later, in 1391, the Jews of Barcelona were attacked en masse: many converted, some fled, and most were massacred. And a hundred years after that, in 1492, all remaining Jews were expelled from Spain—unless they converted, or were killed, first. Yet Nahmanides is still exalted in the Jewish tradition as one of the greatest sages of all time. Certainly the Barcelona disputation contributed to the luster of his reputation among Jews, whatever else it may, or may not, have accomplished.
In sum, in what sense does the Barcelona disputation provide composition instructors with a cautionary tale? I hope it comprises yet another example of a real-world argument situation in which great complexities are on display: the interlocutors using elements from each other's cultures to better or worse effect and, in the process, demonstrating just how much cultural mixing has already occurred; the playing field far from level; the results mixed; and with participation by a great leader and accomplished rhetorician not guaranteeing unequivocal victory for the “side” upon which the better part of social justice appears to lie. The more we understand situations like this, the more we should be cautioned against teaching argument in a simplistic pro-con sort of way.

Moreover, the Barcelona disputation can be considered a cautionary tale about the limits of rationality, since Nahmanides had only limited success in convincing his oppressors, as I guess we may as well call them, of his and his people’s right to survive. Understanding what happened at Barcelona, we should be careful how we teach rational argument and what claims we make for its efficacy. I always say that I “believe in” rational argument; that’s not the same thing as being compelled by it. Often, people aren’t.

At the same time, I think student arguers, and anyone who contemplates struggle for social justice against powerful opponents, can take heart from the limited success Nahmanides did have. Limited, yes, but quite remarkable under the circumstances. Perhaps the example of Nahmanides, like that of Charles Langston and other strivers, shows us how resourceful rhetoricians make use of the materials at hand, however flawed, to do something, however limited, on behalf of their causes. Indeed, this kind of intellectual bricolage may be the fundamental skill of the rhetorician. And perhaps such examples also teach us, when considering the motivation for making good arguments, that social justice must be sought incrementally. Or as the Talmudic saying regarding amelioration of the world has it: “If it is not given to us to complete the task, neither are we allowed to desist from it.”

Works Cited


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